Interview with Joseph McEvoy

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JOSEPH McEVOY

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Q: This is Lew Schmidt interviewing Joe McEvoy at his home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on the 23rd of January 1990. Joe, I'm going to ask you to give a brief biosketch of yourself, where you came from, what your education was, what your experience was before you went into USIA, then we'll cover your USIA tours and we'll take the questions from there. So, will you start now with your background.

Biosketch: Early Newspaper Experience

McEVOY: I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, December 8, 1910. I was attracted to the writing game rather early. When I was in high school my cousin—I was an orphan brought up by my uncle in a large family—my cousin happened to be the basketball coach at high school and I was interested in hanging around for practice and things like that. Actually by the time I graduated, I had gotten to be about sixth man on a pretty good basketball team. But I also found out meanwhile that The Trenton Times which was the principal local newspaper was interested in high school sports results so I started covering basketball when I was about 14 or 15 years old. I liked what I did and I was very pleased to find out that you got paid for doing something that you were happy doing for nothing.

Then I worked on The Times for a full year after I got out of high school because I was really too young to go to college. Later I went to Rutgers where I was graduated in 1932 with a degree, Bachelor of Letters in Journalism. Although this was the middle of the Depression, I got a job through the Dean of the Journalism School. I was with the Ashbury Park Press, which was a very fine small town daily. Today it is one of the top papers of the state of New Jersey.

Associated Press Career

After three years I moved on to the Associated Press in Newark which was the state headquarters. I had covered things for the AP as part of my work in Ashbury Park, including the Morro Castle disaster, the Mohawk disaster and other stories of importance. And in The AP in Newark I learned the mechanics of a news agency operation. I did learn a lot about editing and writing, and I was transferred subsequently to the Trenton Bureau of the AP where in about a year I headed a five-man bureau covering state politics. New Jersey is a small state but a vibrant political situation existed there at the time. And by the time I came in we were still getting the echoes of the Lindbergh kidnappings case. In fact I joined the AP the week that Hauptmann was electrocuted. I stayed there and I had an opportunity to cover some big stories, including the Hindenburg explosion and major sports events.

At the outset of World War Two I was called into New York. We were not yet at war. I worked for an outfit called The Associated Press of Great Britain which was created to provide coverage for British newspapers of world events through so-called neutral reporters, meaning AP newsmen. I stayed in New York after APGB was phased out. In May of '41 I went to Buenos Aires as one of the correspondents down there, primarily covering political things, anything that was news.

Q: You were stationed down there.

McEVOY: Oh, yes. With my family. I had a daughter born in Buenos Aires. In 1943, which was shortly after a revolution in which Juan Domingo Peron played a minor but fateful role, I was sent to Bogota, Colombia to succeed Allan Stewart as chief of The AP Bureau. I stayed in Colombia about a year, then I went to New York for six months, and returned to Buenos Aires to cover Peron's election as president of Argentina early in 1946.

1951: Recruited Into U.S. Information Agency:First Post—Caracas

In '51 I was recruited by the U.S. Information Agency, by a fellow named Forney Rankin. In effect he asked Ambassador Norman Armour, whom I knew quite well, to recommend me. My first post for the USIS was in mid-1951, in Caracas, Venezuela, where Mr. Armour was then Ambassador. I remained three years as Public Affairs Officer.

Q: I'll ask a few questions about the program as we go along.

McEVOY: In Venezuela? Well, the program in Venezuela was coming to life quite well by the time I arrived there.

A Period of Warm Feeling for U.S. Among Venezuelans: Enlightened Policies of American Oil and Mining Companies and Great Numbers of U.S. Educated Venezuelans

Venezuela provided a very favorable atmosphere for USIA activities at that time. We operated two strong binational centers, Caracas and Maracaibo. English language teaching was very, very big because of the presence there, principally, of the U.S.-owned oil companies and the emerging U.S. iron ore companies.

We did have another built-in factor. The American companies and others did a great deal of rather intelligent treatment of their employees and supporting things that were of general interest to Venezuelans. And the USIA program was supported indirectly by a great number of Venezuelans who had been educated in the United States. They ran their own show. We didn't interfere with it, but it was a big help. And of course the press

there was generally friendly. The United States was regarded as a pretty good ally. There were from time to time anti-American outbreaks at the Central University, but they did not disturb any of our programs. Of course if you scratch the surface anytime in Latin America, you can always stir up something against the United States. Actually we had no great problems in my 1951-54 stay there.

Q: You had full access to the Venezuelan press then, and other media?

McEVOY: Oh, yes, press and radio. Absolutely. We had a small staff. To replace John Reid who had doubled as PAO and Cultural Attach#, we got a very good cultural attach#, Al Harkness. He had had more experience than I had had, having served in Central America. We made a good effort to establish solid relations with opinion leaders, many of whom had had a great deal of exposure to the United States, either studying in the United States or by traveling frequently to the United States.

Q: When was it that Harry Kendall came on? Was that in 1951 or a little later? Was he there when you arrived?

McEVOY: No. Kendall came within a year after my arrival. I arrived in the middle of '51, Kendall came in, and he did a variety of things, many of them in the informational and cultural fields. And he had quite a lot of natural ability in making people like him. Harry followed the course that I always think is a very good one—if you want something done, do it yourself. Personal contact I think is terribly important, much more so than inundating people under a lot of press releases. We had very good cooperation from the radio stations down there.

Q: You had full access to them also then?

McEVOY: Oh, yes. There was some American, or Venezuelan-American ownership in radio.

Q: Television really hadn't started at that time?

McEVOY: Television started before I left there, but not to a point of great influence.

Mid-1954: Madrid

In the middle of '54, I was posted to Madrid.

Q: What was your program like in Madrid at that time?

In 1954, Spain Was Enthusiastic About Its New andGrowing Relationship with U.S. Military Bases Welcomed

McEVOY: The program in Madrid had been running along well. The importance of the program in Madrid was that we had to consider as a USIA program priority the construction and development of American military bases, air and naval. That had been handled very well. Of course we were able to take advantage of the situation at that time in Spain—this was during the Franco dictatorship—in that the press was not as free as it might have been. But their enthusiasm for their fairly new relationship with the United States was very important. I went to Spain as Press Officer. I had been Public Affairs Officer in Venezuela. I went over as Press Officer. The PAO was Bill Cody. I didn't have a diplomatic passport because the Passport Division was rather stingy about handing them out at that time. However, Cody explained to Ambassador James Dunn that I had to be calling on the Foreign Office and also the Ministry of Information and would require a diplomatic passport to do my job. Cody said, “I'd like your permission, Mr. Ambassador, to send a cable back to Washington.” The Ambassador said, “No, Bill, I'll do it myself.” So that hurdle speedily was cleared.

Under Franco Dictatorship Most Dealing with MediaHad to be Through Government Ministries

It was a curious situation as to how we dealt with the media there. It was all done, or the majority of it done, through the Spanish government. Oh, we made our courtesy calls and visits and other things to the newspapers and radio stations, but whenever we had a release of importance—and I'm talking about the ones that dealt with general relations, Spanish foreign policy and our own, and the Spanish-American military bases—it was all handled through the Foreign Ministry. There had been a very important step taken at the outset, I think largely through the efforts of Bill Cody, Ambassador Dunn and Major General August Kissner who was in charge of the U.S. military group. Kissner was a very self-effacing person. The American troops who were there—not troops per se, they were mostly officers and Spanish speaking officers or people who were learning to speak Spanish. They never wore their uniforms in public except when there was an event that required it.

USIA Handled All Public Affairs Matters With Foreign Ministry For Embassy, Military, Construction Consortium Building Military Bases

Under the arrangement worked out, USIA was the organism that dealt directly with the Foreign Ministry and included material coming out of the Embassy, the Air Force public information set-up and the public information staff of the consortium which was building the bases, Brown, Raymond and Walsh. Once coordinated, I would bring the release already translated and turn it into the Foreign Ministry, or in some cases the Ministry of Information. It would automatically appear in the newspapers, magazines or radio stations. There wasn't much TV then. But the authorities never changed our copy. We could arrange cultural programs, in which we didn't have deal through the Foreign Ministry.

Q: You never had the normal kind of relationship then with the press in which you would go directly to the reporters or to the editors? You had always to go through the Foreign or Information Ministry?

McEVOY: In most cases. We would, for example, if an outstanding American figure, literary figure, political figure, was in Spain, arrange a news conference. But nobody ever asked the wrong question. That wasn't our doing. That was the fact that they were living under an authoritarian form of government. We had our dinners and our luncheons and everything else and we tried to keep close to opinion leaders. But you had to walk a very close line. We did avoid giving the idea in public that the U.S. was completely sold out to the Spanish government. That was the situation.

Q: I suppose the dictatorship at that time was sufficiently strict so that you really couldn't measure the attitude of the Spanish people toward the government, or could you? Did you have any opportunity to get into that area?

McEVOY: There were a lot of people not with USIA who had a complete opportunity to scout out the situation over there. And of course there was another thing: in the USIA organization we had a lot of Spanish nationals, local staff. And I would say (this had grown up before I got there) it became a sort of haven for ex-Republicans. So you had people who were always willing to come and tell you this or that bit of information. We used to hear anti-Government jokes, but I never heard anyone say Franco was a crook. Of course, some repression existed. For example I know one of our translators was a medical doctor who had been on the Republican side during the Spanish civil war and could not practice except in charity hospitals. He took his month's vacation every year to work for the World Health Organization in Geneva. Now we were talking '54 and I was there till '59. It was a situation that was rather favorable for us in some aspects because we always could get anything in the press that we wanted to. On the other hand, it certainly wasn't democracy in action.

Q: But, with respect to people with whom you could get some feeling about the Franco government, did you sense that there was any widespread anti-government feeling among

the people. After all the Republicans had very wide support before and during the civil war, and I'm wondering how people felt about Franco by the time you were there.

McEVOY: They weren't broadcasting their opposition in strong terms, I can tell you that. Not that they could have. It was surprising, in a way. You'd get the impression sometimes, I mean, that there weren't many Republicans left, that a few of them of the extreme left were still in Moscow.

But we did a lot of things. I was a member of the Royal Madrid Club, which is a big athletic organization. I still retained my interest in sports because I had been a sportswriter. And they were very cooperative. For example, USIA promoted a basketball game between the champions of the National Basketball League of the United States, the Syracuse Nats (no longer in the NBA) and the Royal Madrid club, just a bunch of kids at that time. The Nats had come to Europe under a State Department program. They had appeared in England and Italy on their tour. Spain was the only place where they didn't lose money. The game was a big success.

Subsequently, very interestingly, we promoted a game of American football. This was between American Air Force teams from Bitburg, Germany and Chateauroux, France. The game was played after a soccer game, at Royal Madrid's stadium. The stadium had about 50,000 people in it at the start of the league game and we put the American football on afterward. Royal Madrid wanted to put it on first but I figured if the field got torn up and Royal Madrid should happen to lose, it wouldn't have gone so well for us and them. We had a very good assistant press attach# named Herbert Morales who was educated in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Spain. Very, very capable guy. And he did the play-by-play over the loudspeaker system. It worked very well. We lost a lot of people after the first 20 minutes. They liked the uniforms and the bands, but the game was new to them.

Q: But they didn't—

McEVOY: They had programs with explanations in Spanish if they cared to use them. We must have had 20,000 there at the finish. The fans were interested in forward passing, that's what they liked best. It was a very successful promotion. And I think it did the Air Force image quite a bit of good.

Q: Did you have any other special programs that you think of that were conducted while you were there?

McEVOY: John Reid had been over there, strangely enough. He had preceded me from Caracas to Madrid and had done a good job with the cultural people. And then when his tour of duty ended we got Jake Cantor, who was very good. I had asked for Al Harkness but Al Harkness didn't want to come at that time. Subsequently he did.

Q: I think by that time Al had been a PAO himself and he probably didn't want to come as a cultural officer after he'd been a PAO.

McEVOY: Well, I think if he had gotten assurance that when I left he would become PAO I think he would have been more amenable to the idea. It wouldn't have hurt him at all because he would have done well there. But Jake Cantor is a topnotch man.

Q: He's still going strong. He's now retired from the government but he's with the so-called DACOR House, the Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired. He is the top cultural man there—in charge of their educational foundation, selection of scholarship recipients—

McEVOY: If you run into him, please give him my best.

Q: I surely will.

McEVOY: He did an outstanding job in Spain.

As I say, my job, I mean, was a rather special job I would say. Ambassador John Davis Lodge became very interested in me when I was a press officer and I was at that time

writing his speeches and accompanying him. He liked to travel, and he, having been an actor before, and having a good knowledge of French and Italian, he became very fluent in Spanish. Of course at first he sort of memorized the lines, but then he became fluent at it and he made tours all over the place. And I accompanied him most of the time. Lodge was very amenable to participating in USIA programs.

PAO William Cody Transferred to Paris;McEvoy Becomes PAO

When I was suggested for PAO in Madrid, believe me I wasn't, I don't think, the first choice. Bill Cody went to Paris; Sax Bradford replaced him; then Sax Bradford was shunted off to Brazil at the time because John McKnight had been assigned there but couldn't go. And after Sax left, Washington didn't want to displease the Ambassador. So that's how they made me Public Affairs Officer.

Q: How long did Sax stay in Spain?

McEVOY: I don't know, but it was possibly less than a year maybe.

Q: He had—when I first went into USIA he was my PAO in Japan, and then he became the Assistant Director for Far East and from there he went to Spain. But I thought he had had a full tour. I didn't realize it was cut short.

McEVOY: Yeah. He was I think very solidly behind my appointment. He liked to run programs, but he wasn't really crazy about some of the outside appearances—the public side of the job. He was an outstanding guy and I do miss him. He passed away quite some time ago, I guess.

Q: Yes, he developed a brain tumor in 1966 and died quite suddenly.

McEVOY: A man of great ability. I had known him in Buenos Aires slightly. He wasn't there very long.

Q: I don't remember whether he was ever in B.A. or not as an assignment. He had, he was one of the very early appointees to the National War College and that was about 1947 or '48, and from there he went to Japan. I'm sorry. No, it wasn't that early. He went to Japan in '50—yes, it could have been. Because USIA took over the program from the Army in early 1952, and he had already been there nearly two years, so he had to have gone to Japan sometime late in '49 or early in 1950. I don't remember which. He may have been in B.A. before that. He had been the editor of the Seattle, Washington Star when it was a Scripps-Howard paper, and I think he came into the government from there. He may have had a short stint in the wire service, but I'm not—.

McEVOY: I don't think so, come to think of it. He certainly was a nice guy and very able, and very low-key. I remember one of the things he did when he was PAO, he invited my wife and myself to join him and his wife at a luncheon for two Japanese diplomats. That was one of the longest and most difficult luncheons I ever attended. My wife would say, do you have any children? Yes. Boy? Yes. Girl? Yes. How many? Two. It was going on like that. Anyway, toward the end of the luncheon, the two wives of the Japanese talked —they had been quiet the whole time—and they spoke perfect English. It developed they were educated in the United States. But I suppose it did give me an in with the Japanese Embassy.

Madrid was an interesting assignment. I spent one three-week period as the Ambassador's only aide in San Sebastian. That's where the Spanish Foreign Ministry is in the Summer. I was also writing the Psychological Week.

Q: For the Embassy.

McEVOY: Right. The Agency sent me to Geneva in 1956 to head the USIA news coverage for the Big Four meeting—Eisenhower, Khrushchev, Eden and Edgar Faure of France—and then about a week or so later I went back for another two week stint in charge of the news coverage of the first Atoms for Peace conference.

When I moved up to PAO job in Spain, although the Ambassador wanted me to carry on the press job as I had before, we decided that it would be too much so we got an Assistant Press Attach# and a Press Attach# eventually. And they worked very well. I still wrote a lot of speeches. And did considerable traveling.

Our Air Force public information officers were very cooperative. Jack Higgins was our Information Officer and the Air Force set up frequent trips to France and Germany to places in which he took along with him Spanish newspapermen or radio people. That was all strictly goodwill.

Q: What was Higgins' position?

McEVOY: Information Officer. He succeeded Bob Smith. Is Higgins still around?

Q: He's retired. His first wife drowned over in Thailand and he's now married to a Mexican girl. He's retired in Mexico, and is living in Guadalajara.

McEVOY: Oh. I've lost track, but I know he had great interest in Guadalajara.

Another job that was given to me was to run a press conference in Mallorca for Richard Nixon, Vice President at the time. He was on his way back from Moscow where he had had the “Kitchen Cabinet” session with Khrushchev. Nixon was on his way to London. The powers that be back in Washington didn't want the story spoiled by any announcements en route to London. Nixon had a refueling stop in Spain. So the Ambassador asked me to go over. He said, do you think there will be many American reporters there? I said, I don't think so. And I don't think the Spanish reporters are probably aware of his visit to the USSR. Lodge said I think you ought to go anyway, so he sent me to Palma de Mallorca. Nixon gave a news conference over there. All went well and he went on and made his big announcement back in London.

Q: So he wasn't very big news in Spain then?

McEVOY: He was the Vice President of the United States but that was about it. He would have attracted more attention in Madrid, but that was not in his plans.

Q: He was still pretty big news in Japan when he came through there.

McEVOY: We didn't do much to publicize his visit. The Ambassador was interested in that nothing go wrong. In fact, he went over there to greet him. They had been friends in the Congress.

We had a lot of important visitors in Spain. We had a lot of programs where we could use them.

Q: Public opposition to the American bases had not yet surfaced at that time, had it?

McEVOY: Had not surfaced, no. There was some opposition at first but you wouldn't, if you had been just passing through there, have realized it.

Q: I suppose the Franco government wouldn't let it surface.

McEVOY: No, it wouldn't.

Q: But there was an underground feeling of dissatisfaction, was there, then?

McEVOY: It must have been pretty quiet. You never did hear it. In fact, I think maybe there had been—you see, it had already been underway by the time I got there.

Q: It had been underway a few years by then.

McEVOY: Yes. I think now it's out in the open. Of course, this is the way they want to do it.

Q: Yes, they're gradually getting rid of the bases over there.

McEVOY: That's right.

Q: Then who was it—do you have anything further you would like to say about the Spanish program while you were there, your part of it?

McEVOY: I don't have anything further to say about it. I think it was a good program. We had excellent ties with Radio Nacional de Espana, of course. And the usual program tie-in. I don't think there were any great coups that we pulled off at all. But there didn't seem to be any need to. In fact, in some places we were trying to avoid overplaying our hand while things were running so smoothly.

Q: Then were you recruited directly out of the Spanish USIA program for the position that caused you to leave the Information Agency?

1959: McEvoy Offered Public Affairs Position WithU.S. Steel in Venezuela—Leaves USIA

McEVOY: I had been extended an extra year in Spain at the Ambassador's request. I was looking forward to going to Washington, because I had almost one other opportunity when I was in The AP—to be in Washington—and never made it. I was looking forward to it with enthusiasm, but at about the same time that came up the AP desperately asked me to go back to Buenos Aires. I would have gone to Washington for USIA, but I got this offer from U.S. Steel offering me about double what I was making. I've always doubted in my mind whether I made the right choice or not, because I enjoyed my government work. I also enjoyed my work in The AP. I think I was less well pleased in a corporate structure. I stayed 12-1/2 years with U.S. Steel in Venezuela.

Q: Were you handling their public relations for them? Or what was your position?

McEVOY: I was Director of Public Relations for Orinoco Mining Company, a fully owned subsidiary operating in Venezuela and a very important unit within U.S. Steel. I mean that —when the parent company was sort of foundering in a way, Orinoco was making money.

Comparative Evaluation of Working for AP,USIA, and Private Enterprise

Q: How would you compare your work pro and con, first in the wire service and then in USIA and then later between the USIA and your corporate experience?

McEVOY: Well, when I was with AP I was tremendously enthusiastic about covering news, and I always tried to give it a full and fair picture. I think this is—I was what you would call pre-Vietnam. In the days when I was working for the AP you tried to get both sides of the story. What developed in Vietnam, of course, is that every reporter became an editorial writer, which was perhaps a natural evolution of things. I don't know. I don't mean to say that I was, when I wrote for The AP that I was siding with the government of Argentina, or Colombia or whatever. I was declared persona non grata twice by the Peron government. But I managed to avoid expulsion by just going to the hospital for an operation, staying there two weeks. By that time the American Ambassador, Jim Bruce, talked to Peron, and told him McEvoy was not a communist. I stayed in BA. But it was a little bit different working for our government. I mean there was a little less liberty. But I enjoyed the work and I was rather surprised. I was much more impressed when I was in the government service with the amount of work done by most officers more than I had imagined. I really enjoyed my eight years in Caracas and Madrid.I think I would have enjoyed another tour in USIA. I say tour, I mean if I had been offered another foreign post, not necessarily a Spanish-speaking one. But that didn't happen. And then I got this unexpected offer from former Ambassador Walter Donnelly who was then working for U.S. Steel himself. I would have gone to Washington, I'm sure. Perhaps it might have been better, but in the long run I've never regretted it. I retired after working 12-1/2 years, when I was given early retirement by U.S. Steel. I would like to have gotten another Government assignment of some kind but by that time I was 60 years old and they won't take you back at that age.

Q: In those days you had to retire when you were 60. Government subsequently made it 65, but that has been only in the last six or seven years. So of course, you know that some people have felt that the government service was, well, a bunch of people who couldn't be

employed anywhere else. There has been a good deal of contempt from time to time, but I gather you didn't feel that way about the majority of people in the agency.

McEVOY: Well, I first got to know government people back in Buenos Aires in '41 and you really didn't know what they were doing half the time. But I never held them in contempt, I could tell you that, because I knew a lot of them also when I was in Colombia working for The AP. But I didn't realize until I was actually working in the government the really devoted people that we have.

Q: Do you feel, from your experience in the corporate field, that the people who are working for the corporation have the same kind of devotion to their duties that you found in, say, the U.S. Information Service?

McEVOY: Well.

Q: It's a rather hard question, but—.

McEVOY: I think they do, but I was a duck out of water for a while as far as I was concerned with the U.S. Steel job. I did what I had to do and I think I did it pretty well and I think they thought so too. They were not interested in any drum-beating operation at all. My philosophy has always been, you can do better through personal contact.

Q: You felt—did you feel somewhat more circumscribed in your duties with the corporate field? Or did you just feel that you didn't belong?

McEVOY: Oh, no. I got along with everybody. I really generally do get along with difficult people. I didn't have any experience like that. It was always very pleasant. Rather I didn't have enough to do. Government's really a lot more fun and it's more interesting and it's more versatile. Of course I think working on a small paper sounds more—

Q: Pardon?

McEVOY: Working on a small newspaper is probably more interesting than any of them. When I retired here I worked very briefly as editor of a couple of small give-away papers. That was all right but it didn't last long. The guy that owned them wasn't really interested in professional journalism.

Q: Was that back in the States or was that down in—?

McEVOY: Fort Lauderdale. Here in Fort Lauderdale. The owner wasn't interested in trying to run anything that resembled a newspaper. He was just milking the profits from the advertising.

Q: Do you think you have any other comments you'd like to make?

McEVOY: No, I'm—

Q: Let's call it an interview.

McEVOY: You can call that the end of the interview.

End of interview